

## **MEDIATIZATION OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY: RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S PARISHES ACTIVITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA\***

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**Abstract.** Orthodox parishes actively use social media for their missionary and inner purposes. The paper analyses how the work with social media affect the position of parish members in the religious organization. The analysis is based on comparison of two Yekaterinburg Orthodox parishes: their self-presentation in social media and practices of content production. The authors show that social media discourse does not endow parishioners with agency, at the same time, the media production activities increase the social capital of Orthodox media creatives within Yekaterinburg Diocese. For the priests the media usage has ambiguous consequences: it reinforces the epistemic authority and leads to reassignment of controlling functions over content production between priests and parish media professionals.

**Key words:** Russian Orthodox Church, deep mediatization, social media, media creatives, self-presentation

## **МЕДИАТИЗАЦИЯ ПРАВОСЛАВИЯ: АКТИВНОСТЬ ПРИХОДОВ РПЦ В СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ МЕДИА**

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**Аннотация.** Православные приходы активно используют социальные медиа для миссионерских и внутренних целей. В статье анализируется, как работа с социальными медиа влияет на позицию прихожан в религиозной организации. Анализ основан на сравнении двух православных приходов

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Екатеринбурга: их самопрезентации в социальных медиа и практик производства контента. Авторы показывают, что дискурс социальных медиа не наделяет прихожан агентивностью. В то же время работа с медиа повышает социальный капитал прихожан в рамках Екатеринбургской епархии. Для священников использование медиа имеет неоднозначные следствия: усиливая их эпистемический авторитет, оно также приводит к перераспределению контроля над производством контента между священниками и медиапрофессионалами.

**Ключевые слова:** Русская православная церковь, глубокая медиатизация, социальные медиа, media creatives, самопрезентация

Deep mediatization as increased relatedness of social domains to media infrastructures has resulted in a change of communication flows within the ROC parish communities. This change has brought about the need in media professionals who besides webmasters skills know how to grow the audience, to create popular religious content and to extend its reach out. The paper is aimed to analyse how the work with the digital media position parish members in the religious organization. The aim enables us to put the following research questions:

1. Do social media discourses provide parish members with agencies?
2. Do Orthodox media creatives obtain a special position in the parish community due to their work with social media?
3. How do priests contribute to the production of content and control the practices of its production? What are consequences of these practices for the authority of priests?

### **Orthodox communities in time of deep mediatization**

In order to trace the effects of deep mediatization for the interactions between priest and parishes' media creatives we use figurational approach [4, 5] as a theoretical frame. Accordingly, we understand the mediatization of parish communities as a dialectic process where believers' daily needs and practices are performed through media, and transform after having been entangled with media.

Orthodox parish is a structured organization where the differentiation between lay people and clergy is rooted in specific functions: only a person ordained to the priesthood may administer certain sacraments.

The network approach to Orthodox parish as a constellation of actors cannot grasp these structural differences between the positions of priest and parish member within the ROC. We interpret constellation of actors as a structure following the Bourdieu's theory of the field [1, 6] that allows to link actor's position in a structure with tangible and intangible resources and habitus. In the similar vein, the position within the church structure may change if actor has some professional skills or media capital.

### **Method and research materials**

Our analysis is based on data collected from 2 Orthodox open parish groups on vk.com:

(1) “Temple of St. Prince Vladimir”<sup>1</sup>; “Orthodox LIFE”<sup>2</sup>, (SPV parish) both managed by the priest and parish community.

(2) «Cathedral in Honor of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary»<sup>3</sup>, (AM parish) managed by the parish community.

Our selection criteria for these groups are quality of content and audience interest as engagement rate. Then we read qualitatively the updates posted within three periods:

27.12.2017–10.01.2018, around Orthodox Christmas;

2.04.2018–15.04.2018, around Orthodox Easter;

23.07.2018–05.08.2018, with no significant religious events.

Complementary to text analysis of content, we take into consideration social practices around content production. For this purpose, we do focus groups with community media creatives and interviews with priests.

### **Agency of parish members in social media discourses**

Facilitating interactivity and creativity, social media environment has given to parish members toolkits for presenting their religious views. Orthodox parishes adapt religious messages to social media format: texts become less expressive, less long, and in most cases are complemented by photo, video and links.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vk.com/vladimirekbru>

<sup>2</sup> <https://vk.com/ortodox.life>

<sup>3</sup> [https://vk.com/sobor\\_uspenie](https://vk.com/sobor_uspenie)

While the format Orthodox parishes use for self-presentation is typical for social media, the content has certain saliences. Self-presentations are mostly impersonal. That is, parish activities are often described without references to agents, whereas for mentioned parish members no personal stories are given. We argue that such impersonal self-presentations demonstrate how the Orthodox community core values (sobornost', humility) define the use of secular media format.

### **Orthodox media creatives' position in the parish**

Our analysis is based on two different cases. In case of the SPV parish the media self-presentation on social media is constructed by amateurs, whereas in the case of the AM parish media activities on various platforms are organized by the person with relevant education and professional experience. We infer that the involvement in media production has a different effect on the position in the parish structure of professionals and amateurs.

For the media amateurs there is no up movement within the structure: they begun to contribute to the parish's social media, having been active parish members. Media production activities just helped them to fasten bonds with other community.

In the case of professionals, their media skills ensure their elevation within the structure. Svetlana, the head of the Media Department at the AM, forms the media presentation of the parish and of its priests. Her authority is manifested not only in the control of the work of the department's staff, but also in advising the priest on how to behave in front of the camera. Another example of the elevation within the structure is that the status of a journalist gives the right to visit private religious events.

Therefore, the elevation of media professionals within the parish structure is related to their professional skills such as construction of positive media image of Orthodoxy and engaging the audience, which are significant for the ROC in deeply mediatized society. It is common for professionals and amateurs that their social capital within Yekaterinburg Diocese has increased as a result of the media production activities.

## Authority of priest

In both cases the media projects are seen by their members as initiated and dependent on priest. However the professional skills of media creatives and the existence of parish's communication strategy affect the role of the priest and distribution of control over content production.

In the SPV parish, the priest is responsible for planning the development of the channel. However he is helped by a few parish members with media skills (e.g, SEO specialist and designer) and amateurs. In addition to his authority as a media professional, he exerts the epistemic priest authority [3] by acting as a leading figure in the stream videos where the parish members discuss non-/religious topics. At the same, time media add the new traits to the image of the priest, e.g. the streams from evening jogging with parishioners.

Despite priest's central role, the SPV social media strive to fit the image of open community. The members are interested in feedback, ready to discuss potentially conflict topics during live broadcast and interact with secular audience and other Christian communities.

The AM priest, Evgenii Popechenko, neither involved in the content production, nor used personal social media. He has gained his media capital as a popular Orthodox YouTube blogger as a result of the Media Department's activities. At the same time the priest has an ideological control over the parish's Media Department. He gives his permission (blessing) to the head of the Department for publications about the parish's activities. He as well takes part in monthly meetings with the Media Department that are essential for maintaining ideological coherence of media content.

Equally significant here is a permanent control over posts' style and content by the head of the Media Department. In this case the posts have fixed publishing schedule and format and a wider outreach. However, they gain small number of comments; the negative comments are deleted and disputes are avoided. Apparently, the AM prioritizes parish's exclusively positive media image over the audience feedback.

Hence, both cases are differing in the ways priests organize and control the process of media production. From the one hand, the media

usage enhances epistemic authority of the priests as religious leaders by expanding geographical outreach of their sermons. From the other hand, the function of control over media production is redistributed between the priests and media professionals.

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